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ABSTRACT

This paper offers reasons for teaching Mexican culture in bilingual programs. The first section considers three important court decisions - Lau vs. Nichols, Serna vs. Portales Municipal Schools, and Keyes vs. School District N. 1, Denver, Colorado - and then discusses the extent of bilingual-bicultural education. The meaning of bicultural education is set forth in the second section. The third section emphasizes the obligation of teachers to teach children about their native culture and language. Types of cultural traits in the United States and Mexico are grouped into four categories in the fourth section, the controversial, the indifferent, and "false" and "bad" cultural traits. The final section deals with teaching Mexican history. (CFM)

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"THE MEXICAN CULTURE" in the Education of the MEXICAN AMERICAN

We -- teachers at the Bilingual Program at Phoenix Union High School -- have been asked this question: "Why do you want to perpetuate Mexican culture in the Bilingual Program?"

Our answer to the above question is found in the following paper, consisting of four parts: each one related to a special reason why we concern ourselves with the task of making our students aware of the Mexican culture in themselves, in their home, and in their society.

In the first part, we bring into account various decisions of the United States courts which have charged our schools (1) with the task of making their teachers familiar with the ethnic environment of minority students in their class-rooms, (2) with the need of adding cultural content to our bilingual teaching and (3) with the obligation of doing this to such an extent that the use of ethnic approaches (in all institutions receiving Federal aid) must exceed and surpass the boundaries of the teaching of the English language.

In the second part, we deny our intention or even the possibility of "perpetuating" any one culture, even for the lifetime of our students. We make it possible for the student to find in his bilingual program an atmosphere that is familiar and pleasant to him, so that he will feel "conditioned" to receive our teaching and motivated to an active learning. Also, and above all, we try to rear him in the democratic spirit of an "all-American" school, where he will find a display of cultures from which he will be able to choose according to his own free determination.

In the third part, we stress the moral obligation of the teachers and of the school to abide by the wishes of the parents of the students whose right to educate their children we should uphold.

In the fourth part, we analyze the various traits found within the Mexican culture and conclude with a brief reference to the teaching of Mexican History in our program, trying to prove that it contributes to the building up of pride in the students, and provides a wide horizon to the teaching of American History. We also state here that the study of Mexican history serves as a catalyst for the student to review the various aspects of the culture of his ancestors so that he may exert better judgment in the embracing or rejecting of its various and sundry traits.

I. THE LEGAL ASPECT

Five conclusions have come out of resolutions passed by various U.S. and state courts: the path was opened for the establishment of bilingual-bicultural programs; a cultural content was required in most supplementary programs for ethnic minorities; the legality of racial segregation for educational purposes was upheld; a way to enforce the courts' decisions was found; and the extent of the cultural approach was expanded over and above the mere teaching of the English language, in other words, to English monolingual and predominantly English students who are both underachievers and come from a foreign language background.

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A. The U.S. Supreme Court: Lau vs. Nichols

The landmark case in the field of bilingual-bicultural is Lau vs. Nichols, whose resolutions paved the way for inclusion of a cultural content in bilingual teaching and found a way to enforce future court decisions regarding school districts which receive any kind of Federal aid. The circumstances of the case are as follows:

The action originated in San Francisco, California, during March of 1970. After four years of litigation on behalf of 1,800 students of Chinese ancestry, the case was finally taken up and decided by the Supreme Court. The decision was not based on a constitutional requirement, but on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that forbids the use of federal funds under any program or activity that denies the benefits of education on the grounds of race, color or national origin.

H.E.W. was, then, charged with the task of formulating guidelines to the compliance of the "Lau Law". These regulations clearly indicate that "instructional personnel teaching the students in question (with or without a language problem, but underachieving and with a foreign language background) must be linguistically and culturally familiar with the background of the students to be affected".

B. Serna vs. Portales Municipal Schools (New Mexico)

In July of 1974, the District Court elaborated a little further into "Lau Case" when the New Mexico State Board of Education complained against "the Supreme Court intrusion in the internal affairs of a school district." The court replied:

..."Once a right and a violation have been shown, the scope of a district court's equitable powers to remedy past wrongs is broad, for breadth and flexibility are inherent in equitable remedies. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, appellees have a right to bilingual education... We believe the trial court, under its inherent equitable power, can (also) properly fashion a bilingual-bicultural program which will assure that Spanish surnamed children receive a meaningful education."

C. Keyes vs. School District N. 1, Denver, Colorado

On April 8, 1974, another major court decision was given in the case Keyes vs. School District N. 1, Denver, Colorado. The decision was prompted by the U.S. Supreme Court because of special classes, designed by Dr. J. Cárdenas for Chicano students, as a part of the program for desegregation ineducation.

The court elaborates saying:

"One educational element called for by the proposed Cárdenas plan is the utilization of bilingual training, particularly in the low elementary grades. Currently, many Chicano children are expected not only to learn a language with which they are unfamiliar, but also to acquire normal basic learning skills which are taught

> through the medium of that familiar language. Some provisions for effecting a transition of Spanish-speaking children to the English language will clearly be necessary adjunct to this court's desegregation plan."

The court went on to praise and adopt the Cárdenas plan, making also the teaching of subjects other than English compulsorily bilingual-bicultural.

Another interesting facet of this case has to do with the relationship of bilingual education to integration. In formulating the integration program in this judicial case, the court allowed two schools to remain predominantly Spanish-surname in composition. This was in response to the express wishes of the Spanish-speaking community.

As H.E.W. put it, while explaining the decision of the Colorado Court:

> "Men segregate themselves for the study of a particular discipline, be it art, history, or auto-mechanics. Students can segregate themselves for a bilingual education. The purpose of such segregation, though, is not primarily racial, but educational. However, if the educational objective ceases to exist, their segregation turns racial, and racial segregation is forbidden by the law."

D. <u>The Extent of Bilingual-Bicultural Education</u>.

H.E.W. requires compensatory education for non-English students and for under-achievers with a foreign language background. While leaving the exact description of the program to individual SECONDARY school districts, it makes bilingual education compulsory in the elementary grades. In the secondary school, bilingual education is optional, but highly desirable. Once bilingual education is adopted, regulations are identical for both elementary and secondary schools. Which students must be included in the program? Only <u>two criteria</u> are necessary to determine which students* should receive bilingual-bicultural help according to a chart designed by the Arizona State Board of Education: (1) underachievement, and (2) home language, or student's first language other than English.

It does not make any difference how well the student speaks the English language; the student can be very fluent in English; he might even be an English monolingual. If he does not achieve at grade competency (and is not a mentally retarded person, of course,) there is a strong conviction among the H.E.W. people that it is the student's cultural background of his home which prevents him from fully understanding the concepts and values of the Anglo-American culture dominating the teaching in most of our schools.

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* besides "monolingual other" and "predominantly others"

E. Temperamental traits. Emotionalism, machismo, quick temper, etc. can be classified also as "cultural traits;" this can be done, however, by stretching their scope a little bit. Here we will consider them anyway.

Emotionalism is a wonderful ingredient to sublimate any artistic creation. It is a highly human element. At school we could make a mistake trying to suppress it as bad or at least as "un-American." We should direct it towards its proper objective and teach our students how to capitalize on it.

Machismo is an attitude common to all cultures, although its influence is stronger in Latin America. It is not strictly Mexican.

Quick temper is also found everywhere, although traditionally it is considered as more frequent in most Latin countries.

What should a teacher do with these traits? First of all, he should recognize that these are not essentially Mexican, and he should not imply in front of his class that they are Mexican characteristics. Secondly, he should treat each case according to its circumstances. Emotionalism may hide a very sensitive soul capable of the highest achievements; machismo could be transformed into man's pride for motivation; and a quick temper might turn into a source of prompt and creative decisions.

F. Good cultural traits. The world has cast its verdict in favor of many Mexican cultural traits, praising them, embracing them and even including them into the culture and ways of life of other races and countries. Mexican food (one of the basic elements of culture) has been acclaimed by most other countries; it is used and cherished in all continents and "Mexican Restaurants" are found in most important cities not only of the U.S. but of the world. Mexican music (both popular and classical) has conquered the hearts of millions! It is heard everywhere, and everywhere it is liked. Mexican painting is also highly esteemed: many American universities own Mexican murals and Mexican painters have left marvellous marks of their genius all through the American continent as well as in Europe. Mexican artistic creativeness is one of those intangibles that many Mexicans possess which makes them more sensitive to all manifestations of art, —such as sculpture, embroidery, pottery, leather work, etc.

The teacher must distinguish two essential elements in these so called "cultural traits." First, their objective quality. If their quality is good, the teacher may point out to his students that these cultural traits belong to the cultural treasure of mankind. Those traits might have originated in Mexico, Greece or Liberia and these countries may as well take pride in their contributions to world culture, but they are now American as much as Mexican or Greek. This attitude of the teacher will give pride and security to his students: pride, through the joy of sharing, and security by saving them the embarrasment of feeling "unique."

Secondly, the teacher must find the other element in these traits which can contribute to making them very useful to the students:

If culture were like a coat that can be taken off and exchanged for another more suitable one, the solution to this problem would be the immediate supplantation of the home culture by the predominant one. H.E.W., however, does not think that culture is like a piece of garment. In its guidelines, H.E.W. says that the students who speak English but are not achieving because of their original culture, must be given an instruction that "should correspond to the regular instruction for all racially/ethnically identifiable students who are underachieving, regardless of their language background." In other words, those students should be instructed in a bicultural environment rather than by a bilingual method.

All students, therefore, whose home language is other than English can be eligible -- if underachievers — for this bilingual-bicultural education.

II. THE EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

The expression bicultural education has been misunderstood quite frequently. Its meaning has been twisted to signify that all aspects of a certain culture are being perpetuated. Such interpretation, however, should be repudiated as absurd.

First of all, the prefix bi means here that we are dealing with "two", two cultures in our case, not just the Mexican one; but also the Anglo values side by side with the Mexican values that the student may study them, be fully acquainted with them and learn successfully to live in either environment. Second, not all aspects of Mexican culture are stressed in the Bilingual Program; only the ones deemed beneficial to the student. And third, we think that it is not up to the teachers to perpetuate any one culture. Trying to do that would be against the most elementary tenets of pedagogy and education.

"Bi-cultural Education" is a concept that can be analyzed from several points of view. Here we shall constrict ourselves to only two of them: the pedagogic and the democratic one.

A. The pedagogic aspect of bicultural education is highly pragmatic. No good teacher would dare to start his teaching by antagonizing his students. If he has learned the a,b,c's of elementary psychology of education he knows that he must, first of all, start "where the students are." We see this very rudimentary principle broken in many of the classes attended by Chicanos everywhere, when the teacher shows disrespect for their values, traditions, and culture. There is an even worse way of killing the motivation of the students by the teacher ignoring an obvious fact: that in his class there are minority students or students with language difficulties. Most of the times, those students are segregated by omission to an obscure corner of the classroom. No wonder we suffer with so much attrition of Chicanos everywhere in our district!

Bicultural education means, first of all, that the teacher is conscious of the presence of minority students; that he is happy with their presence; that he likes them; that he identifies with them; that he speaks their physical, cultural and emotional language; that he DOES NOT CONDEMN THEIR CULTURE, OR IGNORE IT. On the contrary, bicultural education means that he is familiar with another culture besides the

Anglo-American, and that he tries to live in it; that he stresses the good points of it and can stand, gladly, the bad points of it.

Bicultural education means that the student is surrounded in his classroom and in the school by familiar sights, being able to think of them as some kind of continuation of his home environment. It means that we try to make the student comfortable in the school; that we attempt to create in him a feeling of security and selfsatisfaction rather than feelings of resentment or fear; it means that we try to stir in him the ingredients needed to produce "self-esteem" and the feeling of self-assurance and dignity without which qualities the student will find it too hard to succeed.

Bicultural education means, most of all, that we do not teach our students above their heads; that we start where they are and that, FROM THERE we grow with them in appreciation of other cultures by analyzing the way other people talk, live, act, etc.

B. The democratic aspect of bicultural education is interesting. Acting purely in a dictatorial style of education, we could tell our students how great the American culture is and how base and how harmful the Mexican way of life is for them. The deeds of great men and women of Anglo ancestry could be extolled; the nobility of the American principles (political, economic, educational, etc.) exalted, while an attempt could be made to eradicate in the students anything that is Mexican. This seems a caricature, but it is, in truth, a reflection of what happens in too many schools. This procedure seems to us highly undemocratic and highly UNAMERICAN.

We think of a school (most especially a high school) as an America in miniature, where all cultures, traditions, values and customs of the people on earth are contributing to the enrichment of the total population. How sad America would be with only one culture imposed over the community, domineering all expressions of the people's life and supressing the manifestation of anything that is not of Anglo-Saxon extraction. How dull, poor and unhappy that kind of America would be!

We conceive of America as the market-place where the free American goes around shopping for the best, most beautiful, and most fulfilling among all kinds of ideas, tendencies, traditions and cultures. But, how can this American person select the best kind of merchandise, unless all of it is on display for him?

That is, in our thinking, the task of the American school: a total display of values, cultures and traditions for the benefit of a free mind in a free America. A market-place where the student, through instruction, experience and self-determination, will choose whatever might be most convenient, just and profitable to him.

The Bilingual-Bicultural Program should strive for a fair and truthful presentation of the values of the two cultures involved: the Mexican culture where all the students in the program were originally nurtured, and the Anglo-American where they will have to breathe and spend the rest of their lives. Our only regret is that, up to now, we have not been allowed to make our program "MULTICULTURAL" to include the

Black culture and, in small degree, the cultures of the American Indians and of the Asiatic students enrolled in our school. We dream of the day in which this total display of cultures will be possible in our program, in the Freshman Program, or in some other project designed for the advancement of our school. We have to be satisfied now, however, with the opportunity of showing some of the Mexican-American culture within the framework of the school as a whole.

III. OUR MORAL COMMITMENT

We, teachers, are not the owners of our students. The state isn't, or the nation as a whole. Nobody owns them, not even their parents. The parents, however, have a natural right and duty to educate their children, and we --the teachers-- are just helpers to the parents in the task of instructing, leading and educating their youngsters.

From our experience in the Bilingual Program, we can say that the parents of the students enrolled in the program want their children to know about their culture and their language. That is the main reason why they insisted in getting them registered with us.

Let us imagine, (just for the sake of argument) that we have an intimate conviction that the wishes of the parents are wrong; that is not good for their youngsters to be exposed any further to the Mexican culture. Let us suppose that we would get those kids into our program with the preconceived intention of "cheating" their parents: that once the kids are in our hands we would work towards their deMexicanization." We might be deeply certain that Mexican culture is harming the kids: that it is in the way of their success; that it should be removed to make it possible for them to become better Americans. All this might sound expedient to us, but...would it sound honest?

On the other hand, we are confronted with an opposite kind of loyalty. We are the agents of the state and so we are also constrained into making our students good and happy citizens of the U.S.A. We are sure that they will not be prosperous and fully useful to society unless they assimilate the dominant culture. Besides, we are loyal Americans and love our country; therefore, we want our students to love all the American ways which are laudable and helpful. What can we do, then, to be true to both apparently opposite loyalties?

We think that the problem is exceedingly simple. We can be loyal to America, to the students, to their parents, to the school and to each other just by being truthful. If we cannot feel sincere devotion to any one of the two cultures, we should not pretend to tackle an impossible task; but, if we do feel respect at least to the culture of the minority along with respect to our own; if we have become familiar with the culture of our students and got to love it (as we --at the Bilingual Program--do now), then we are in the best position to stress the good sides of both cultures and teach our students to respect and imitate whatever is good in both of them. We can be loyal to the parents and to the state by letting the students know both cultures so that they can choose intelligently and assimilate what they see as the best of each.

IV. DIFFERENT KINDS OF TRAITS

Not everything in Mexican culture is bad. Mexican culture, as well as the Anglo-American one, has some good traits and might have some that are bad. Even more: each one of these two cultures has traits that are indifferent and others that are the object of great controversy. Let us analyze all these traits.

A. Controversial traits. One controversial trait of Mexican culture is the Mexicans' deep respect for their elders. Is it good? Or does this respect retard individual growth towards progress? Close family ties is another characteristic of the Mexican culture. Are these ties too much of an obstacle towards a timely liberation of the children? Or do they provide a better opportunity for the parents to exert their beneficial influence on their children? Or do they prevent the children from assuming personal responsibility? Is siesta bad or is it good?

On the Anglo-American side, we learn that competition is the key to success. Mexicans, however, look at competition with suspicion, as an enemy to loyal and mutual co-existence; as a bad trait because it puts people on the defensive, always fearful that one's friend may become his greatest enemy. Is that so? Do the teachers know? If they do not know, why should they attempt to destroy something whose merits or demerits are still under scrutiny? Why should they anticipate the verdict of mankind?

B. Indifferent traits. Style of dressing, hours of having the daily meals, architecture, etc. Who can say which is good and which is bad? Why change our students according to our own tastes?

C. False cultural traits. Sloppiness, laziness, lawlessness, etc. are sometimes attributed to a certain type of culture. An impartial observation of all the facts will show these traits as existing in any culture, not as cultural traits, but as natural consequences of poverty, oppression, and ignorance. It would be a misstatement --both inaccurate and misleading— to call those traits "Mexican cultural traits." Addiction to drugs, greediness for the money resulting from their sale, etc. are not Mexican specialties. One way or another, these calamities that afflict mankind in our days are by no means peculiar to Mexicans or to Mexico; probably because the law is extremely severe with them in that country.

Attitudes, traits, tendencies like those described above should be eradicated, of course; but, for heaven's sake! do not think that, while so doing, you are eradicating the Mexican culture of your students.

D. Bad cultural traits. In all honesty we cannot find any traits that we could label as "bad Mexican cultural traits." The seven deadly sins (source of all other sins of mankind) are found in all cultures and among most people on earth. People scourged with avarice, greediness, envy, laziness, etc. are found all over our planet. We would not be truthful if we said that those sins are not found among Mexican people, but we would not be telling the truth either if we stated that those vices are more prevalent among Mexicans than among all other races. It is fine for the teacher to try to teach his students the virtues opposed to those sins, of course; but, again, do not think that, by doing so, you are uprooting any "Mexican cultural traits."

their motivating value. Most cultural traits of the Mexican American student carry with them tremendous possibilities to stimulate him. We may take advantage of the subjective quality of these traits and utilize them for the student's own expression. Most Mexican American students could find a way to excel in their classes by relating the subject matter (Math, Geometry, English, etc.) to their artistic sensitivity. Once the way to accomplish this educational "marriage" is found, the students become highly motivated and eager to learn.

V. THE TEACHING OF MEXICAN HISTORY

What a course on American History tries to accomplish on behalf of the American student, a course on Mexican History attempts to achieve on behalf of the Mexican American, i.e., to present a spectrum of cultures so that the student may be able to assimilate that which he considers the best, answering his questions about his past and making him feel comfortable at the present moment and secure in looking towards his future.

Every human being is rooted in the past (whether he realizes it or not). The Mexican-American student cannot find all his roots in New England or within the Thirteen American Colonies. The color of his skin, the words in his mouth, the way of life in his home, his own pride will tell him that there is much more in the story... and he wants to know the rest.

Without some knowledge of Mexican history, the student will feel very uncomfortable with his role in society and will never feel sure about his future. He will think of himself as a pariah, as a conquered man within the American community, not knowing how he fits into the overall picture.

When the story is told in its fullness, it makes sense to him. He belongs to two worlds made now one in the free spirit of America. Through his ancestors, he belonged to one of the two cultures that built this nation. He himself was a builder of this great country in those heroic men he learns about in the history of Mexico. Starting in the West, his ancestors did what William Penn, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin did, starting in the East, on the sea-board of the Atlantic.

This presentation of American History is "the whole truth", and we should not be afraid of the truth. In the Mexican-American student, the truth does produce a feeling of wholesomeness which will continue feeding his pride and his ambition as long as he lives. Finding himself - along with his family background and his culture within the framework of a broader America will motivate him for learning; he will become a better student.

It is natural that each student should pick up a certain aspect of history or a certain historical character as more attractive to him than others; it is natural that young people --always believing that any change will bring along brighter days-- will emphasize the revolutionary episodes in the Mexican history more than the creativity of great Mexican scholars, discoverers or educators. We see this trend among youngsters everywhere. However, the passing of time will make an impact on their appreciation of values and will improve their perspective. Our understanding for their longings of today will become, tomorrow, one more reason for

them to admire and imitate us when they reach maturity. This attitude of our youngsters should not bother us.

CONCLUSION

Mexican culture —if properly known and understood— is not so bad that it must be eradicated at once. It has some controversial aspects whose merits are not for us, teachers, to define. It is often confused with the culture of poverty and with the abjection —way of life— resulting from oppression; it has temperamental traits that, properly channeled, can enhance the morale and the motivation of the student. Finally, it has many good traits which no teacher should attempt to destroy.

The Mexican History class is the catalytic means of bringing those traits into focus so that the student can recognize them in himself, at home, and among his peers; where he can make up his mind as to which ones he should keep and which ones he should reject. The student should do this work of selection, though, not we, his teachers. At least this is our concept of the task we have been called upon to accomplish in a free school and for a truly free American.

We are bound by a feeling of loyalty to the United States, our country, to teach our students the values of their own nation. We believe this to be imperative to their happy future and to their success in life. We are obliged, also, to be sincere to the parents of our students who want their children to learn about the history and culture of their family and their ancestors. We cannot let down the parents of our students.

We understand this to be the intention of the United States government in its three branches: that we —teachers of this great minority— learn about their culture, get familiar with it and lovingly present it to our students in the classroom.

Therefore, we feel compelled by this most sacred duty to do it, and we are confident that, in so doing, we better serve the interests of the students, their parents, their school and their country.

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(The above article was sent to the FORUM by Mrs. Vega who has long been a fighter for bilingual and bicultural education in Phoenix and in the whole state of Arizona.)